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ABSTRACT

Information is presented in this paper regarding suprasegmental features of Black English thay may cause reading interference for some Black children. Much of the research concerning reading problems of many Afro-American students stresses the segmental differences of the phonology, the morphology, the syntax, and lexical selection between two dialects of American English referred to as Black English and Standard English. Not enough attention has been given to suprasegmental features of Black English such as intonation (pitch, stress, and juncture), prosody, and loud-speaking. Black English is a speech that has common African core elements fused with English. The process of the fusion begins with American languages through a pidginization stage, through a creolization stage (the language called Gullah), to a decreolization stage, to the output-Black English. One can assume that some African language features have been retained and research studies are cited showing that suprasegmental features, especially pitch, are important to the understanding of Black English. Pitch has semantical as well as phonemic significance; certain intonational patterns in Black English may be misunderstood by white teachers who are checking comprehension through oral reading. (MKM)

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SUPRASEGMENTAL ASPECTS OF READING INTERFERENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Suprasegmental Aspects of Reading Interference

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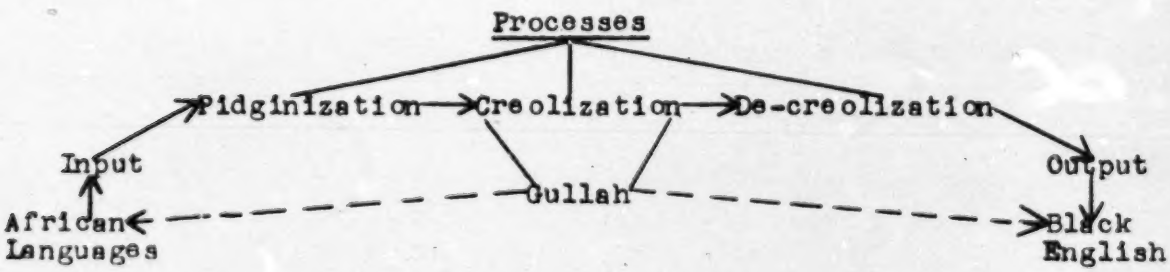
In this paper, the speaker will present information regarding certain suprasegmental features of Black English that possibly cause reading interference for some Black children. Particular attention will be paid to intonational differences.

The speaker's approach will be three-fold: 1) he will define Black English diachronically, 2) he will examine certain of its synchronic features, and 3) he will discuss some of its educational implications from a possible reading interference point of view. His conclusion will emphasize the necessity of having linguistic knowledge in designing educational research, especially any research pertaining to Black English.

The speaker's diachronic definition of Black English will entail an understanding of the following continuum theory:



The synchronic examination will emphasize the significance of Johnson's remarks regarding the intonational register of Black

English, and the work that Tarone did in relation to Johnson's remarks. Tarone's discovery of the use of intonation to mark "if-clauses" will be presented via some of her examples.

In showing the educational implications, the speaker will suggest that intonational differences between the teacher and the pupil might be a cause of reading interference which can be detected during a student's oral reading. The degree of the interference might depend on the extent to which the dialect is spoken and to the extent to which the teacher's idiolect differs from the child's.

Educators must realize the importance of suprasegmental as well as segmental differences of Black English, and linguists need to provide much more information about Black English intonation. Perhaps in-depth examinations of certain tone languages of West Africa will provide syntactic and semantic clues regarding the Black English intonational registor.

SPEAKER'S PROFILE

Colston R. Westbrook has an A.A. in Foreign Languages from Contra Costa College in San Pablo, California and received his A.B. and M.A. degrees from the Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley. His graduate area of specialization was Black English Dialectology. He is now finalizing his Ph. D. work in the School of Education's Language and Reading Development Program and concurrently teaches for the Education Extension at the same university. He is 37 years old and was born in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

Suprasegmental Aspects of Reading Interference

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Much of the research concerning reading problems of many Afro-American students stresses the segmental differences of the phonology, the morphology, the syntax, and lexical selection between two dialects of American English most commonly referred to as Black English and Standard English. Unfortunately, little investigation has been conducted concerning certain suprasegmental features, especially intonation. In this paper, the speaker will discuss the pitch feature of intonation as it relates to possible reading interference for some Black English-speaking people.

The speaker's approach will be three-fold: 1) he will define Black English diachronically, with special emphasis on pitch; 2) he will examine certain of its synchronic pitch features; and 3) he will discuss some of its educational implications from a possible reading interference point of view. His conclusion will emphasize the necessity of having linguistic knowledge in designing research, especially any research pertaining to Black English.

"Dat a plum girl comin' ova dere." Is this an example of Black English? Or, is: "That's a plump girl coming over there" an example of Black English? What criteria is used to determine the characteristics of Black English? In the first sentence,

phonological and morphological differences are immediately noticeable whenever one compares that sentence with the second. However, what if both sentences are read with pitch contours that are commonly found in the speech of many Afro-Americans? Before responding to this question, the speaker will define Black English.

Black English is a label that is used to describe the speech of many Afro-American people. Such speech is a variety that is superimposed over all varieties of the American English language, and it has sub-dialectal differences due to regional variations. Black English must, therefore, ave common African core elements that have fused with English from the British Isles, and the dialect has been perpetuated through the years due to racial and cultural isolation.

Thanks to the investigations of certain linguists with creolist leanings, scholars have learned that Black people in America have a dual linguistic heritage. That is to say, the origin of Black English is no longer deemed to have in some inferior variety of the English language that was spoken in the British Isles which the slaves learned whenever they came to America. Such is the view of many synchronically geographically-orientated dialectologists, SGOD's if you will. (The acronym even sounds horrible).

The current, and in this speaker's opinion, the most correct view is that the processes of pidginization, creolization, and de-creolization are necessary in reconstructing the origin of Black English, and these processes must have had input from numerous African languages. In this speaker's research, he used Bakweri, a language of Cameroon, West Africa as one of those

input languages. And other languages such as Yoruba, Ibo, Twi, Ewe, Duala, etc., could have been used.

The Cameroon/Nigeria area was theorized as the most likely place for the pidginization of English due to written evidence provided in Daryl Forde's The Efik Traders of Old Calabar. In addition to that evidence, however, the American slave word buckra, meaning "white man," is found in the Efik-Ibibio languages of the Niger delta, and Pidgin English is still spoken in Cameroon and Nigeria. A comprehensive approach to this continuum theory is presented in the speaker's thesis.[1]

The important point of these introductory remarks is: did the slaves just throw their African languages away whenever they came here to the American mainland? Can not one assume that the fusion of African languages with the English language permitted retention of some African language features? And if any one particular feature was retained, what might that have been?

Much attention has been given to the "missing copula" which in many cases is a verbal adjective carried over from some African language, e.g., she pretty. In fact, too much attention has been given to segmental features of the phonology, the morphology, the syntax, and the lexicon, and not enough attention has been given to suprasegmental features of Black English such as intonation (pitch, stress, and juncture), prosody, and loud-speaking. It is unfortunate that these areas, especially intonation, have been neglected. For it is the speaker's opinion that many of these suprasegmental features are very important in understanding Black English and the possible problems that can

be caused via differences with Standard English. For example, in order to understand certain pitch differences, one must be receptive to the continuum theory previously mentioned because the understanding of West African tonal languages is requisite to understanding Black English intonation. For, pitch in many West African languages shows syntactic or semantic relationships. So, if Black English is part of the continuum from which came West African language input, then it is reasonable to assume that there might be remnants of West African language tone in the speech of Afro-Americans disguised in the intonation.

In 1941, Melville J. Herskovits, a renowned anthropologist, wrote The Myth of the Negro Past. In his book, he provided much information on language and arts of which special remarks were made about "Negro Speech." His remarks concerned the similarities between the Negro's "musical quality" of English as it was spoken in the United States and the tonal elements in West African speech, noting the fact that tone had semantic as well as phonemic significance remained to be studied.

Not too long after Herskovits wrote his book, Lorenzo Dow Turner, an eminent Black linguist, published his findings of the seventeen years of work that he did on Gullah.[2] Turner's monumental study traced thousands of words back to their African origins and bridged other gaps in the syntax, morphology, and phonology--with special emphasis on the intonation of Gullah. The SGOD's, not knowledgeable in African language structures, categorized Turner's work as an "isolated case."

Thanks to renewed interest in what was still called "Negro Speech" in the early 1960's, Turner's work became significant in

that certain sociolinguists and creolists brought forth information about West African Pidgin English that was used as a basis for determining the roots of Black English. But, the focus was always on the segmental rather than the suprasegmental features.

During the mid-1960's, however, a black scholar by the name of Kenneth Johnson[3] boldly pronounced that Black English had six levels of pitch, intonationally. His pronouncement was bold, very bold indeed, and some linguists frankly labelled him as being "crazy" for making such remarks. (This speaker, too, tended to agree with what those linguists said since most of my training was from a non-black perspective). But, Johnson continued with his remarks, emphasizing that a falsetto with an ensuing sub-falsetto existed in Black English. If Johnson would have produced some kind of "concrete linguistic data" to support his hypothesis, perhaps his remarks would have been better received. But his only evidence was his own observations, saying "listen to how the black folks talk." (The difficulty of recording any such data, and the subsequent blotting out of the noise around it should be noted). Johnson's hypothesis, or "Ken's Hypo" as the speaker has dubbed it, is significant because it calls attention to the importance of pitch in Black English intonation.

Almost a decade after Johnson started making his remarks, Elaine Tarone submitted her Aspects of Intonation in Vernacular White and Black Speech dissertation.[4] She conducted a major synchronic study of intonation using linguistic techonology (such as the spectograph) and linguistically-trained individuals (phoneticians). Her findings provided very significant information about the marking of dependent clauses with pitch, omitting

the concomitant use of the lexical item "if." Other differences were noted, especially concerning the attitudes of speakers.[5]

> If intonation does communicate speaker attitude [as was proposed by Pike in his 1946 The Intonation of American English work], and if Black English differs from the standard dialects of American English in the intonation patterns used, then it would appear that there would be a high likelihood of misinterpretations of attitude and intention in communication between speakers of different dialects.

Tarone posed the following question to a Standard English-speaking teacher:

2 3 1
You the teacher?

(Linguists have traditionally used numbers to diacritically mark pitch levels with 4 being the highest level). Tarone's explanation of the above question is as follows:

> A falling contour is used here with a general question--a contour which, in this context, might be considered aggressive, peremptory, and probably rude in the teacher's eyes. There might be classrooms where such a student might conceivably be sent to the office because of his rude "tone of voice." At this point, the teacher needs to understand that (a) an aggressive, strong, assertive "tone of voice" may be very functional for a student who participates in Black street culture, and (b) such a student can be expected to use intonation patterns which are systematically non-standard. Such an understanding on the part of the teacher is a beginning point for communication, and perhaps also for a similar understanding on the part of the student regarding the role of "tone of voice" in Standard White English communication.

Aside from the teacher's role in the question posed above, Tarone discovered the use of intonation to mark "if-clauses" without the concomitant use of "if" in Black English. Some of her examples are:

2 3 2 3 2 3 1
You able to do it, just do it.

31 2 3 2 31
Hey, talk to him, you talk to him.

3 2 3 1 1
He can walk out, she can walk out.

3 4 3 11
She can do me some good, that's cool.

Tarone's work, as was Johnson's, is important to the future of educational research.

In a recent article by Vogel and Mc Grady,[6] the authors made reference to C. Lefevre, a linguist, who considers intonation the most important and least understood signaling system at the sentence level, and he links it closely with the perception of syntactic patterns. Furthermore, Lefevre has emphasized the importance of internalizing the intonation pattern of one's native language for the development of syntax for reading comprehension. In Tarone's previously-mentioned examples there is evidence of intonation internalization, but of particular interest is pitch (a suprasegmental feature) being substituted for "if" (a segmental feature).

Vogel and Mc Grady state that written material is devoid of intonation, and the reader must reimplant the melody of language by utilizing the clues that punctuation and his or her own oral language provides. An example of the authors' remarks can be found through the reader's intonation internalization of the following dialogue taken from BLACK JARGON in White America:[7]

Jim: What's happenin', mellow?
Bill: You got it, brother.

Jim: Hey, man, last night after Ken split from his crib, some dude ripped off his box and all his bad jams.
Bill: Anyone see the cat?

Jim: Yeah, the gray broad downstairs said he had a Deuce and a Quarter. Hope they bust him, man.
Bill: Right on, brother.

Jim: If Ken meets him he says he'll be thumpin' not rappin'. He ain't frontin', man.
Bill: I can dig it, Jim ain't jivetime.

Jim: We'll see you at the gig, mellow.
Bill: Solid, brother.

Many people might equate the above dialogue with that of the speech of many Afro-Americans based on segmental cluses, especially lexical items. If, however, the dialogue is not read with Black English intonation, then there will most likely be some hesitation regarding the dialogue's acceptability to a speaker of Black English.

Oral reading provides teachers with the opportunity to check a student's comprehension. But if the teacher is not aware of the intonational interaction (as was in the case of Tarone's examples), then how will the teacher be able to truly ascertain the student's reading comprehension?

This speaker concurs with Vogel and Mc Grady when they say that very little is known concerning the role of intonation, its interaction with linguistic features, and its relationship to reading comprehension. Regarding Black English, it will also be necessary to conduct investigations of certain West African tone languages in hopes of finding syntactic and semantic clues that

are possibly intonationally-disguised in Afro-American speech. In order to accomplish this, the educator must be sufficiently versed in Linguistics to transgress many of the commonly-analyzed segmental features of Black English in order to analyze its scarcely-studied suprasegmental features.

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3. Kenneth R. Johnson is an Associate Professor, School of Education, Language and Reading Development Program, University of California, Berkeley. He is also the Director of the Institute of Race and Community Relations at the same university.

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